



Autopsies have to be error free

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NEWARK - There's no room for error.

One mistake could save or destroy lives.

A detail could mean the difference between solving a murder and missing it all together. At the Regional Medical Examiner's Office in Newark, where 1,200 autopsies are performed each year for Passaic, Essex, Hudson and Somerset counties, absolute accuracy is a necessity.

Every unexplained death, suspected homicide, suicide, overdose, car accident or death that occurs during police custody is taken here.

The bodies are then inspected, inch by inch.

"You can't take anything at face value," said Dr. Zhongxue Hua, regional medical examiner for the Division of Criminal Justice. "Sometimes a case looks benign on the surface, but underneath, it's something quite different."

Like the time Hua looked at the size of a 41-year-old man's heart, recognized it was enlarged and notified the dead man's sister of a disease her brother never realized he had, a genetic disease that could just as easily have killed her.

"That's very common among poor families where they can't afford to go to the doctor," Hua explained, as he stood next to an assistant making a Y-shaped incision into the chest of a cadaver. "Things just go undetected."

In another case, Hua took one look at a liver and discovered the deceased had a drug habit.

All the while, Hua said, he is trying not to violate a family's religious beliefs or force the issue when a distraught family member doesn't want to accept a cause of death.

"The body really belongs to the family," said Phil Larkin, a supervising state investigator at the medical examiner's office and former funeral home director. "That is the bottom line."

As many as 11 autopsies that take anywhere from an hour to several days are performed at the same time. The two-story building is complete with seven toxicology labs, libraries, conference rooms and two morgues. Built by the state in 1981, the multi-million dollar medical examiner's office is now maintained with state and county funds. The investigations done here, which determine the cause of death, can take moments or months, depending on the case.

Some will never be solved.

But Hua, one of six doctors, works four-day shifts and is on call 24 hours a day. Originally from China, the 41-year-old became intrigued by the O.J. Simpson case when he moved to the U.S. to attend college. Hua decided to become a coroner at the medical examiner's office because it helped entire families through the healing process of losing a loved one.

"Sure, we serve the dead," said Hua. "But the rewarding part is helping the family find a cause. Finding the justification. It's closure."

Doctors such as Hua are among the first responders to a crime scene. They testify as expert witnesses during trials. They counsel families after they lose a loved one. They are paid to be doctors, detectives and defenders of the dead.

Up until 1995, Passaic County had its own coroner and its own medical examiner's office. But in 1996, the state formed the regional medical examiner's office for Passaic, Essex, Hudson and Somerset counties. The change has allowed for specialized doctors, better equipment and more autopsies to be performed.

The office, which is also used as a teaching facility, employs 75, has seven labs and completes a third of the autopsies done in the state. Three hundred autopsies were performed on Passaic County cadavers in 2004.

"It's more efficient. It saves money. But what matters most is the quality of the work," Hua said.

Hua and the other employees at the medical examiner's office work hand in hand with police departments, investigators and prosecutors.

"They're really an integral part of the investigative process, especially early on," Passaic County Chief Assistant Prosecutor John Latoracca said of the Medical Examiner's Office. "Ultimately in all homicide cases that go to trial, the medical examiner is called as a witness and is qualified as an expert in forensic pathology."

The medical examiner must testify not only to facts, but also to opinions based on medical probability, Latoracca said.

"Before the office was regionalized, some of the doctors were general practitioners that did this on the side," Latoracca said, adding that now there are specialized doctors working 24/7. "Because of that, the quality of the work and testimony is far superior to what it was years ago."

Each autopsy is carefully documented. Tissue samples are saved and stored on tiny diskettes. Digital photographs are taken of the body. Files dating back to the 1920s are stored in records rooms.

Every case is given the same precise and thorough concentration. And each autopsy must be perfect. "If you mess up one diagnosis and you get sued, there goes all that money you saved over the past 10 years," Hua said.

So, each case is painstakingly processed. "There's no such thing as a partial autopsy," Hua said.

Coroner's humor.